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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the relationship between site location of and attendance at an organization's annual meeting. It assessed whether participation in the annual meeting increased or decreased in the host state; if participation increases when the meeting is in the home state, whether that participation level is maintained in the following year; whether participation is higher in states other than the host state; and whether participation is higher in larger cities. A case study approach was used with data for the Mid-South Educational Research Association, whose member states include Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Computer files of the annual meetings "Proceedings" for 1984-1991 and annual meeting programs and Secretary-Treasurer records were used. Data include the actual numbers of participants, papers accepted, and registrants. The percentage of change in numbers of participants was calculated. Participation increased in states hosting the annual meeting. Participation was higher in the host state when compared with average participation from that state in the other states. While the participation level did not remain as high in subsequent years, it was higher after hosting than in years prior to hosting. While larger cities have more attractions to encourage member participation, there was no direct correspondence between host community size and participation level. Seven figures and two tables are included. (RLC)

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Geographical Location and Attendance for a Regional Research Association

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Abstract

Because meeting site may be related to the size of the organization, this study addressed four questions as indicators of the relationship between site location and attendance: Does participation increase or decrease in the host state for the annual meeting? If participation increases when the meeting is in the home state, is that level maintained in the year following? Is participation higher in states other than the host state? Is participation higher in larger cities? It seems that participation has tended to increase in the states hosting the annual meeting. Participation also tends to be higher in the host state when compared with average participation from that state in the other states. While the level of participation tends not to remain as high in subsequent years, it does tend to be higher after hosting, than in the years prior to hosting the meeting. While larger cities may have more attractions to encourage members to come and participate, there was not a direct correspondence between the size of the host community and level of participation.

Geographical Location and Attendance for a Regional Research Association

The selection of a site for a professional meeting, particularly for multi-state groups, is important because of the potential impact on attendance and, subsequently, membership. Assuming that membership growth is desired, it is reasonable to expect that some consideration be given to selecting sites which will attract new members to the organization. Among factors to consider is the attractiveness of a site in terms of geographic location. As financial support and incentives for professional travel diminish, it becomes worthwhile to consider site rotation as an alternative to one or more "fixed" locations. The purpose of this study, then, is to investigate the relationship between attendance at annual meetings and the sites selected, for one regional educational research association. Because the study is centered around a single organization, it may lack generalizability, although it may be considered representative of a number of groups under the umbrella of the American Educational Research Association.

In a fairly recent two-part study of 40 special-interest education associations, which appeared to be reasonably representative of these groups nationwide, Scott (1985a, 1985b) reported that site selection was of high importance--rated 1 or 2 on a 5-point scale--to 29 of 36 groups responding to the question. None of the groups assigned the lowest rating, 5, to the question of the importance of site selection to attendance. In addition, 25 of 38 groups responding indicated that they rotated their meeting sites. It should be noted that the groups sampled were all national in scope and their sizes may have limited the selection of sites which could accommodate their meetings. Also, the term "rotation" was not clearly defined. For instance, the American Educational Research Association was listed as nonrotational, but in fact has met in recent years in various locations, including San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans. Whether this is an interpretation problem or simply an error is unknown. (AERA procedures may also have changed since Scott penned the article.)

Another report at the national level was completed by Fairweather (1982), a geographer, who analyzed what he called the spatial patterning of conference participation. In essence, he studied the pattern of states from which participation occurred, for several conferences of the Association of American Geographers. By calculating a Coefficient of Geographical Association (Smith, 1975), he was able to document the attendance drawn from across the country for the annual geographers meeting. The advantage of the coefficient calculation over simply using a total number of participants is that the calculation included differences between years by state. In other words, if the conference drew more Californians one year but fewer Texans, and the opposite situation was the case the next year, then the total draw might appear to be consistent, even though the pattern of attraction varied.

The Organization

The Mid-South Educational Research Association (MSERA), the subject of this investigation, is a regional research association with six member states: Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee (see map). The approximate geographic center of the MSERA region is 88 degrees west longitude and 34 degrees north latitude, a location just east of the state line separating Alabama and Mississippi, and approximately 60 miles south of the northern border of Alabama. The members are largely drawn from the six states and include college and university faculty and graduate students, local and state education agency employees, and others sharing an interest in educational research (Flaitz, 1992). Membership is currently over 600 (Lancaster, 1992). The annual meeting of the association lasts two and one-half days and is scheduled during the first two weeks of November each year. The meeting consists primarily of presentations and symposia by members reporting on research or evaluation findings related to education. Training sessions make up a minor portion of the program. The site for the annual meeting currently is rotated, but is always located in a major city in one of the six member states. From 1972, when the association was founded, through 1984, the annual meeting was held in Louisiana--specifically, New Orleans--in even-numbered years and in a city in one of the other member states in odd-numbered years. By 1984, the annual meeting had met at least once in each member state.

In 1985, the Future Site Selection Committee, consisting of one representative from each of the six states, surveyed members attending the annual meeting regarding their preferences for a plan for annual meeting site rotation. At the meeting of the Board of Directors in the spring of 1986, the current practice was initiated, with the decision to rotate the annual meeting alphabetically among the member states during the odd-numbered years, and with the selection of the specific city in the designated state to be based on the recommendation of a committee from within that state. Alabama became the first state in rotation in 1987 while Kentucky was designated as the most recent state site, in 1991.

In the years when there is no designated state, the Future Site Selection Committee is empowered to recommend a city from any of the member states to serve as the site. Under this arrangement, it is conceivable that the same city could be selected consistently so that the annual meeting would be held in the same location every other year or, possibly, three years in a row.

During 1984-89, the annual meeting was held in each of the member states. In 1990, it repeated in the city in which it was located in 1984, New Orleans. Annual meetings have also been held in the southern-most and northern-most major cities in the six-state region, from New Orleans, Louisiana, to Louisville, Kentucky. The membership of the organization also varies among the member states, so at times the annual meeting has been in states with large numbers of members, while at other times it was in states with small MSERA memberships.

Literature Review

Thus far, it seems that the relationship between the location of the meeting and membership has had little investigation. Two studies, Scott (1985a, 1985b) and Fairweather (1982), were national-level. Other references included other MSERA-related papers (Boser, Clark, & Trivette, 1991; Boser, Trivette, & Clark, 1991, McLean, Hortman, Pruet, Prater, & Steele, 1982; McLean & Kim, 1991) and a state and regional study by Wasik (1989). In the McLean studies the unit of measure was the paper or presentation, so that a participant could be counted twice if presenting two papers and a half if sharing authorship. In the later investigations of site selection and membership for MSERA, there seemed to be a "home-court advantage", in that membership increased in the states hosting the annual meeting; although the McLean, et al. study, which encompassed the first ten years of the organization, did not find increased state participation for the host state. It seems possible that the frequent visits to New Orleans in the earlier MSERA years could have influenced this finding.

The current study will update these investigations by including the results of the meeting in Lexington, Kentucky. The significance of Lexington is that, for the bulk of the membership, it is the most distant location for a meeting of the organization. Therefore, the impact of location on attendance is likely to be maximized there.

Because meeting site may be related to the size of the organization (Wasik, 1989), this study addressed four questions as indicators of the relationship between site location and attendance: Does participation increase or decrease in the host state for the annual meeting? If participation increases when the meeting is in the home state, is that level maintained in the year following? Is participation higher in states other than the host state? Is participation higher in larger cities?

Method

Procedures

A case study approach was utilized to focus on a specific organization and the participation in the annual meetings of that organization. The factors of size and composition of the membership of this association and the distance the members must travel to attend the annual meeting may not be typical of other organizations. A "participant" in the annual meeting was defined as someone who was the first author of a discussion session paper or display presentation, first author of an individual paper or discussant in a symposium, or a training session leader. Each of these individuals was expected to be present at the meeting. Session chairs were not included, nor were second and subsequent authors. The two authors of this paper, one using the annual meeting Proceedings (Petry, 1984-1991), and the other the annual meeting programs and Secretary-Treasurer records (for

registration information), independently created computer data files for each year of the study. The files contained the names of the participants, the institutions they represented, and the states of residence. After all the data were entered, the entries were alphabetized by the last name of the participant. Duplicate entries (an individual listed in the program or the Proceedings more than once in a single meeting year) were collapsed so that each individual's name appeared no more than once on any list. The two lists for each year were compared for accuracy. When discrepancies occurred, the program and Proceedings were consulted to resolve the discrepancy, with the Proceedings accepted as the most authoritative source. Corrections and/or changes can be made in the Proceedings which cannot be made in the program since the program is completed at least one month prior to the meeting for advance mailing to the membership, while the Proceedings is distributed at the meeting.

After the data files were corrected, one file was saved for each year. Comparison of the alphabetized lists for all eight years produced a list of 13 "regulars", individuals who participated each of the eight years. The lists were then sorted by the participants' state of residence. The study focuses on variations, and there was no variation for the 13 regulars. Therefore, the names of these individuals were marked to avoid their being counted during any of the years of the study. The final step was to count the number of participants from each member state each year. The numbers were verified by an independent count by the second author. The number of papers accepted for presentation at the meeting and the number of individuals registered were similarly documented.

Data Sources

The sources of data for participants were the official programs and the Proceedings of the annual meetings of the Mid-South Educational Research Association from 1984 through 1991. The number of papers accepted and the registration figures were obtained from the MSERA Researcher, the newsletter and official publication of the organization, and the minutes and reports presented by committee chairs at meetings of the Board of Directors. The populations of the host cities and other major population centers--Metropolitan Statistical Areas with populations of 400,000 or more--were taken from The World Almanac and Book of Facts, based on data from the 1990 census.

Data Analysis

The data presented include the actual numbers of participants, papers accepted, and registrants. The percentage of change in the numbers of participants was calculated. Kendall's tau correlation coefficients, preferable to Spearman's rho for sample sizes less than 10 (Borg & Gall, 1989), were computed between pairs of the variables of host city population, recency of annual meeting, participants, papers accepted, and registrants. In addition, the Coefficient of Geographical Association mentioned earlier was calculated as an index of the similarity or dissimilarity of the spacial patterning. The formula, cited in Fairweather (1982), is available in Smith (1975). The coefficient's scale ranges from 0 to 100. A high reading on the scale indicates a high degree of change in the pattern of attendance from one site to the next, suggesting that the two sites attracted widely varying groups, geographically speaking. For the purposes of this study, the only states considered were the six member states. Although participants from many other states are drawn to the meeting, their numbers are small and are not the focus of this investigation.

Results

Chart 1 displays the numbers of accepted papers, participants, and registrants by state for the MSERA annual meetings from 1984 through 1991. (The 13 regulars are not included in any of the counts throughout the results.) The number of accepted papers has increased every year except 1987 and 1991. In 1987, the decline amounted to only one less accepted paper. In 1991, the decrease was substantial, but the two-year trend (1989 and 1991), excluding the New Orleans "bump", was still increasing. Total participation increased every year except 1988 and 1991, when meetings were held in the two northern-most sites, Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky, respectively. A more detailed disaggregation of the state participation counts is provided in Chart 2. The number of registrants varied through the years, with peaks in 1986 and 1990. In 1986, the meeting was held in Memphis, the closest meeting site to the geographical center of the six-state region. In 1990, the meeting was

held in New Orleans, a city which has tended to be a favorite among the membership, and one which had not served as host for 5 years. In no year did the number of participants increase for all six member states.

Hosting the annual meeting was associated with an increase in participation by individuals in the host state (see Chart 3). When compared with participation for the previous year, increases ranged to 34. Only in Kentucky in 1991 did host state participation not increase. In two states, Arkansas and Louisiana, the number of participants more than doubled when the state was the site of the annual meeting.

Participation declined in the year following the host year in all six states (see Chart 4). The overall effect of hosting the annual meeting was to increase participation in four of the states. Chart 5 displays the two-year change, the increase from the year before the host year to the year subsequent to the host year (Prior year data was unavailable for the earlier meeting in Louisiana.).

Comparison of a state's participation during the year it was the site of the annual meeting with the average of its participation when other states hosted, indicated that for five of the six states, participation was higher when they served as hosts (see Chart 6). Only in the case of Mississippi was the average participation in other states greater. The Kentucky and Louisiana figures were averages of 1988 and 1991, and 1984 and 1990, respectively.

Comparison of rank orders of the host city measures of participation, populations, and recency of the meeting (see Table 1) indicates that participation seems to be most closely associated with the number of papers accepted (tau = 0.86), presentation of which is a characteristic of participation; and the recency of the meeting (tau = 0.81), suggesting a trend of growth in participation. The correlation between participation and registration was 0.62, suggesting that a number of participants do not register. The relationship between participation and population was negligible (tau = 0.14), suggesting no relationship worthy of note. Registration seemed to be most closely associated with number of participants (tau = 0.62, as noted before). Since participants are expected to register, the relatively low correlation suggests that some participants do not register. Registration and number of papers accepted correlated somewhat (tau = 0.57), as did registration and population (tau = 0.52). The correlation between registration and recency of the meeting was fairly low (tau = 0.43). Registrations have fluctuated while participation has increased fairly linearly.

Table 1

Kendall Correlations Between Rank Orders of
Population, Participation, and Recency

	Participants	Papers	Registrants	Recency
Population	0.14	0.29	0.52	0.14
Participants		0.86	0.62	0.81
Papers			0.57	0.86
Registrants				0.43

Coefficients of geographical association were computed for pairs of years, beginning with 1984:

Table 2

Coefficients of Geographical Association

1984-85 (New Orleans to Biloxi)	13.79
1985-86 (Biloxi to Memphis)	16.57
1986-87 (Memphis to Mobile)	21.41
1987-88 (Mobile to Louisville)	34.49
1988-89 (Louisville to Little Rock)	13.53
1989-90 (Little Rock to New Orleans)	17.24
1990-91 (New Orleans to Lexington)	12.64

As noted in the procedures, the coefficient's scale ranges from 0 to 100. A high reading on the scale indicates a high degree of change in the pattern of attendance from one site to the next, suggesting that the two sites attracted widely varying groups, geographically speaking. The low readings observed here, however, suggest the opposite, that the pattern of attendance has not been dramatically altered over the years, although there was some noticeable shifting around the Mobile visit.

The small figures for New Orleans to Biloxi and Biloxi to Memphis support the low relationship noted earlier between participation and population. Changing to and from these population extremes created little in the way of a new pattern of attendance. Biloxi was, however, within 100 miles of two population centers, Mobile and New Orleans.

Discussion

There has been a general trend for the number of participants to increase across the years. The number of papers accepted has also tended to increase each year, but the number of registrants has been somewhat erratic. It is the policy of the organization that all persons who attend the meeting, even those who come only for the final half day, are to register. This policy has not been applied consistently and may account for the some of the variation in the number of registrants, although it is not possible to gauge the extent of the error due to this source.

Hosting the annual meeting increased participation by individuals in a state compared with their participation the previous year. Although participation tended to drop the subsequent year, the resulting participation tended to be above that of the year prior to hosting the annual event.

Four questions relating to meeting site and attendance were asked earlier. In response to these questions, it seems that there is a home court advantage. Participation has tended to increase in the states hosting the annual meeting. Participation also tends to be higher in the host state when compared with average participation from that state in the other states. While the level of participation tends not to remain as high in subsequent years, it does tend to be higher after hosting, than in the years prior to hosting the meeting. While larger cities may have more attractions to encourage members to come and participate, there was not a direct correspondence between the size of the host community and level of participation.

The dramatic increase in participation in 1990 may be at least partially attributable to the lure of the unknown. New Orleans can be an exciting city in which to attend a meeting. While the 1984 data, also from New Orleans, represented the lowest participation, the meeting had been held in New Orleans during alternate years prior to that year. By 1984, the city may have suffered some loss of appeal through familiarity. Six years later, however, that appeal may have been revived.

Thirteen individuals were identified as "regulars" in this study, which is not to suggest that they were the only individuals who attended all eight meetings under study. Many individuals attended every year, but were not listed as first authors on papers.

Conclusions

Hosting the annual meeting did seem to have a positive impact on participation by individuals in that state. It was not a case of "familiarity breeds contempt". In no state did participation drop during the year the state hosted the annual meeting. Hosting the annual meeting promoted participation which, in some states, had a carryover effect. The location of the host site, however, did not appear to radically change the pattern of attendance throughout the states, so rotating the site did not detract from attendance in general, but it did tend to boost attendance in the host sites. If the intent of the organization is to promote participation in all of the states, it seems that the best recommendation is the continued rotation of the sites for the annual meeting.

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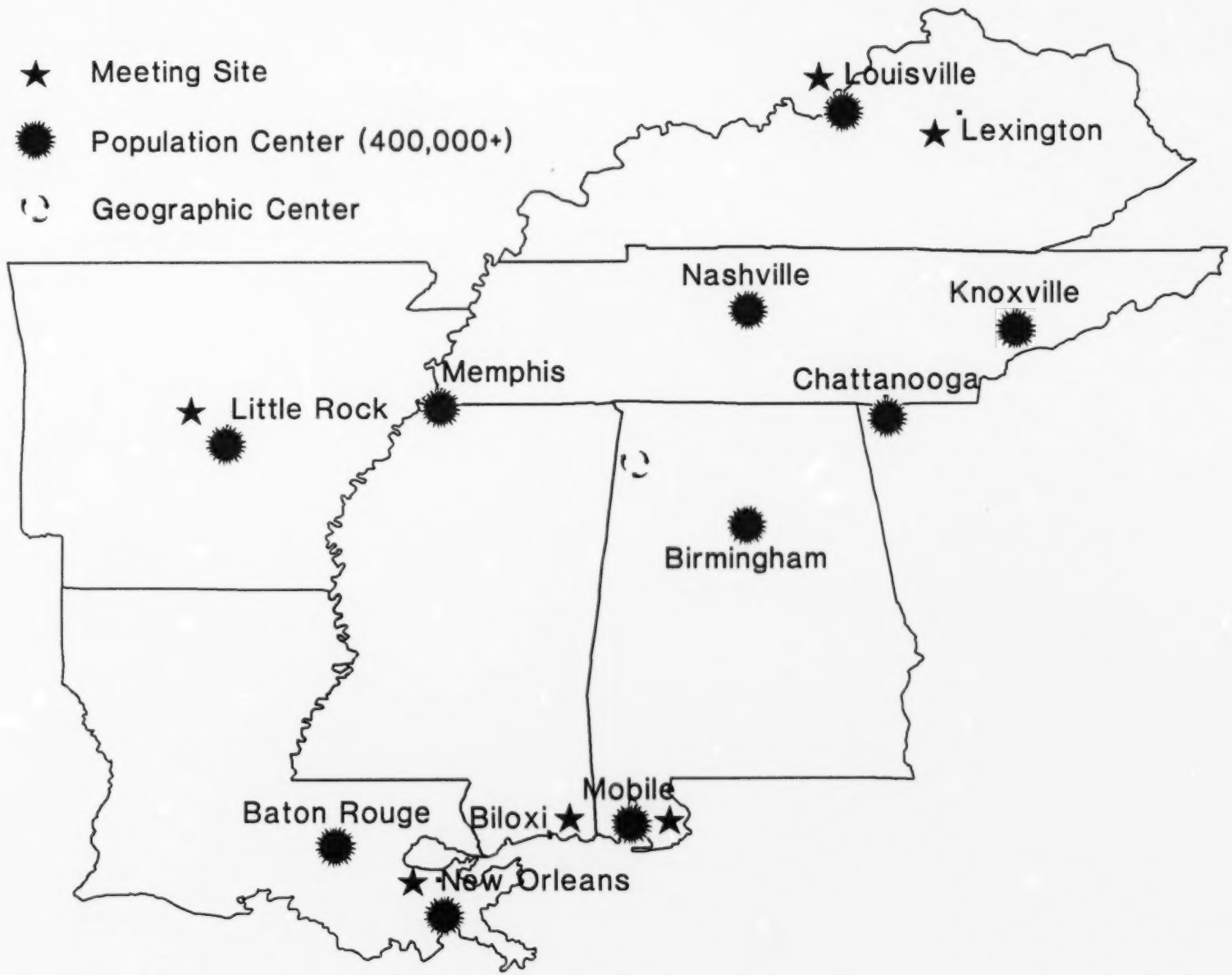
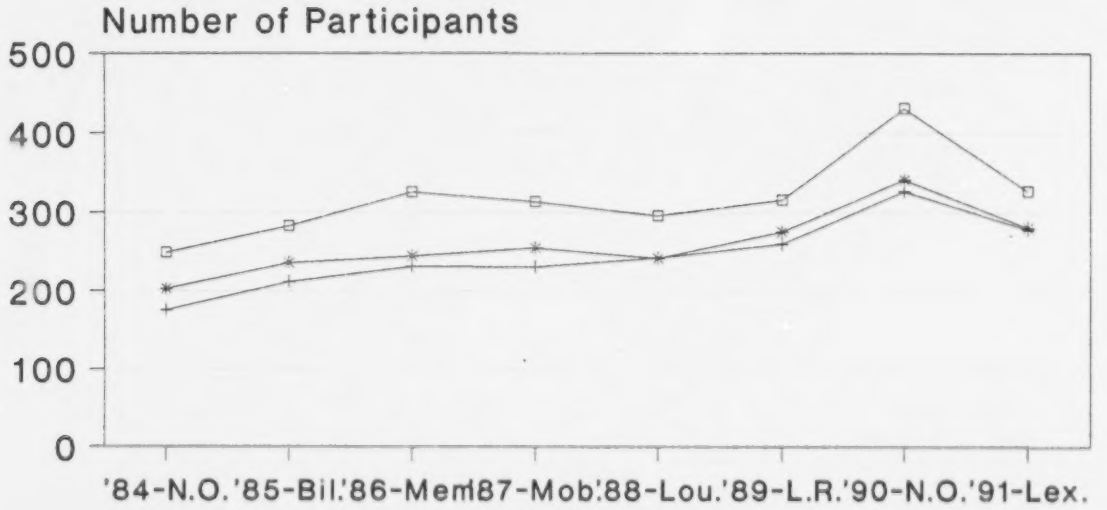

Meeting Site
Population Center (400,000+)
Geographic Center
Louisville
Lexington
Nashville
Knoxville
Memphis
Chattanooga
Little Rock
Birmingham
Mobile
Baton Rouge
Biloxi
New Orleans

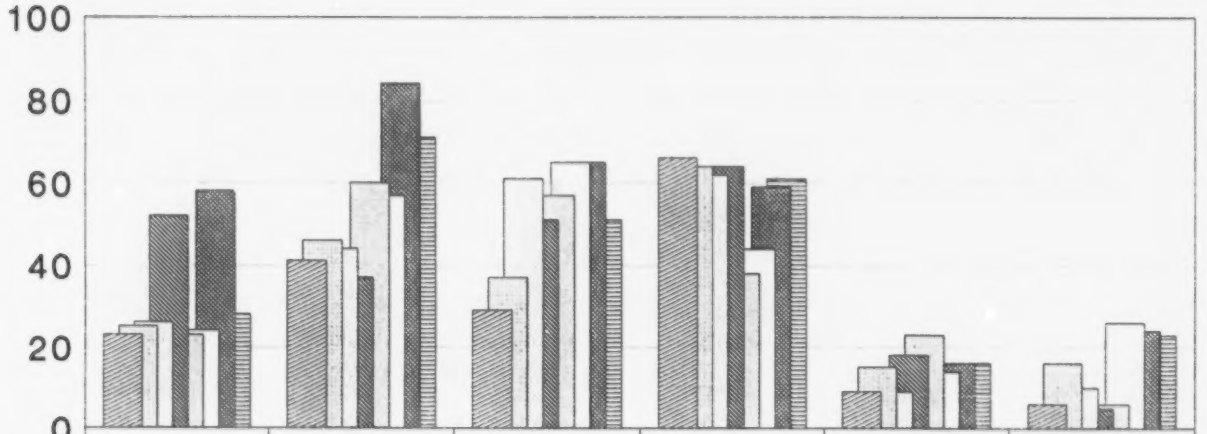
Chart 1. Meeting Sites and Participation



	'84-N.O.	'85-Bil.	'86-Mem	'87-Mob	'88-Lou.	'89-L.R.	'90-N.O.	'91-Lex.
Accepted Papers	175	211	231	230	242	259	326	278
Participants	202	235	244	254	241	275	341	280
Registrants	248	282	325	313	295	315	431	326

Does not include "regulars".

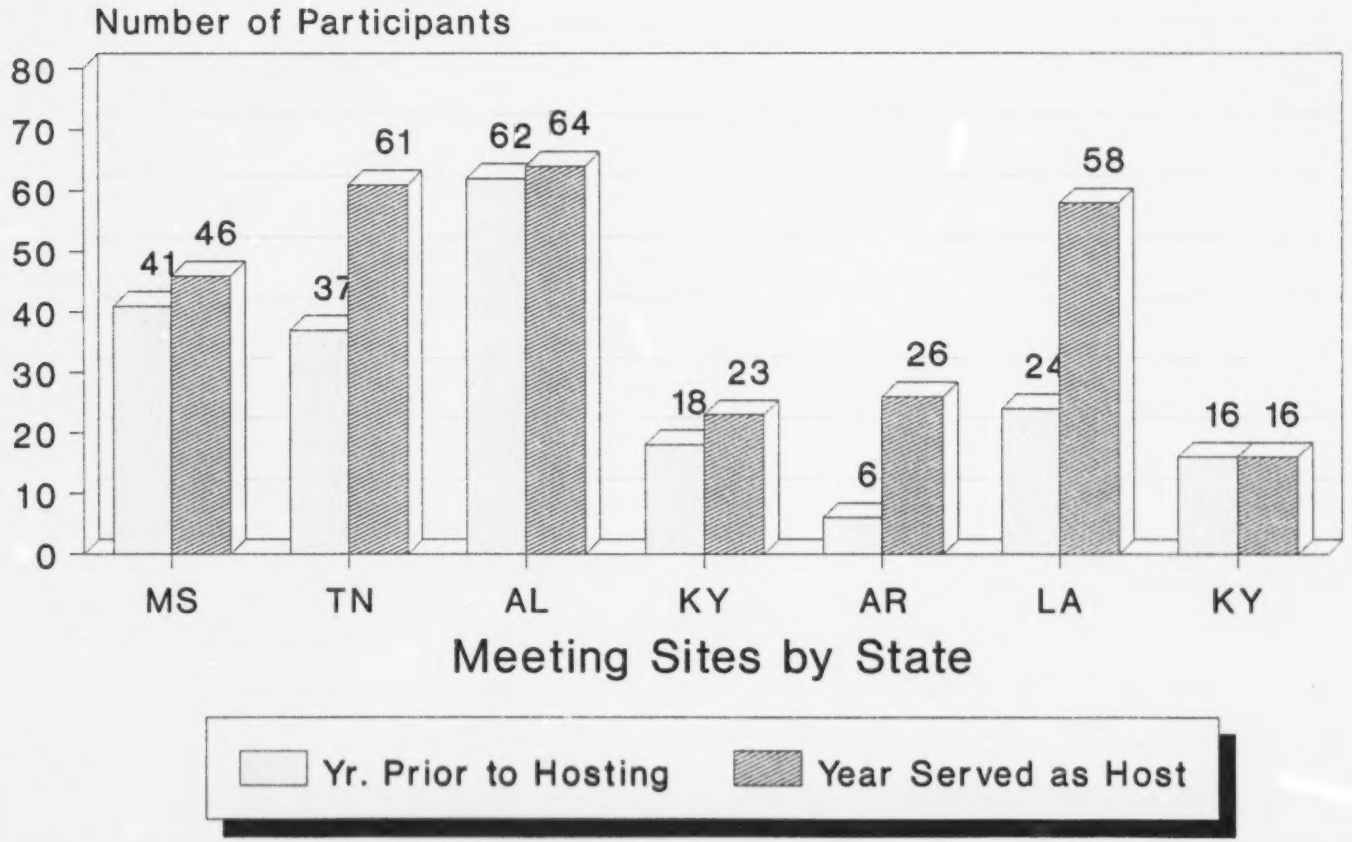
Chart 2. Meeting Sites & Participation



	LA	MS	TN	AL	KY	AR
1991	28	71	51	61	16 *	23
1990	58 *	84	65	59	16	24
1989	24	57	65	44	14	26 *
1988	23	60	57	38	23 *	6
1987	52	37	51	64 *	18	5
1986	26	44	61 *	62	9	10
1985	25	46 *	37	64	15	16
1984	23 *	41	29	66	9	6

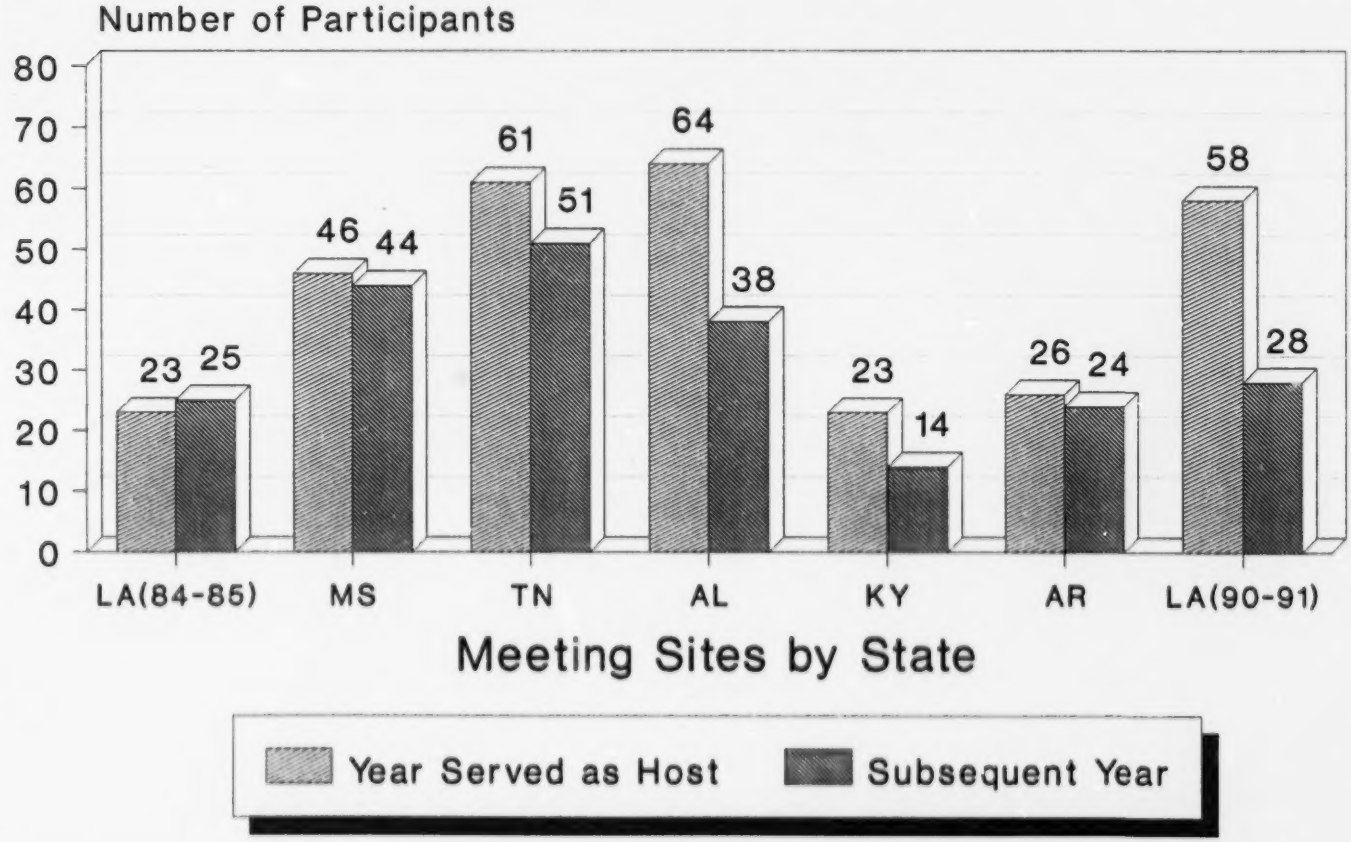
Does not include "regulars". *(Host)

Chart 3. Host Site Participation
Host and Previous Years



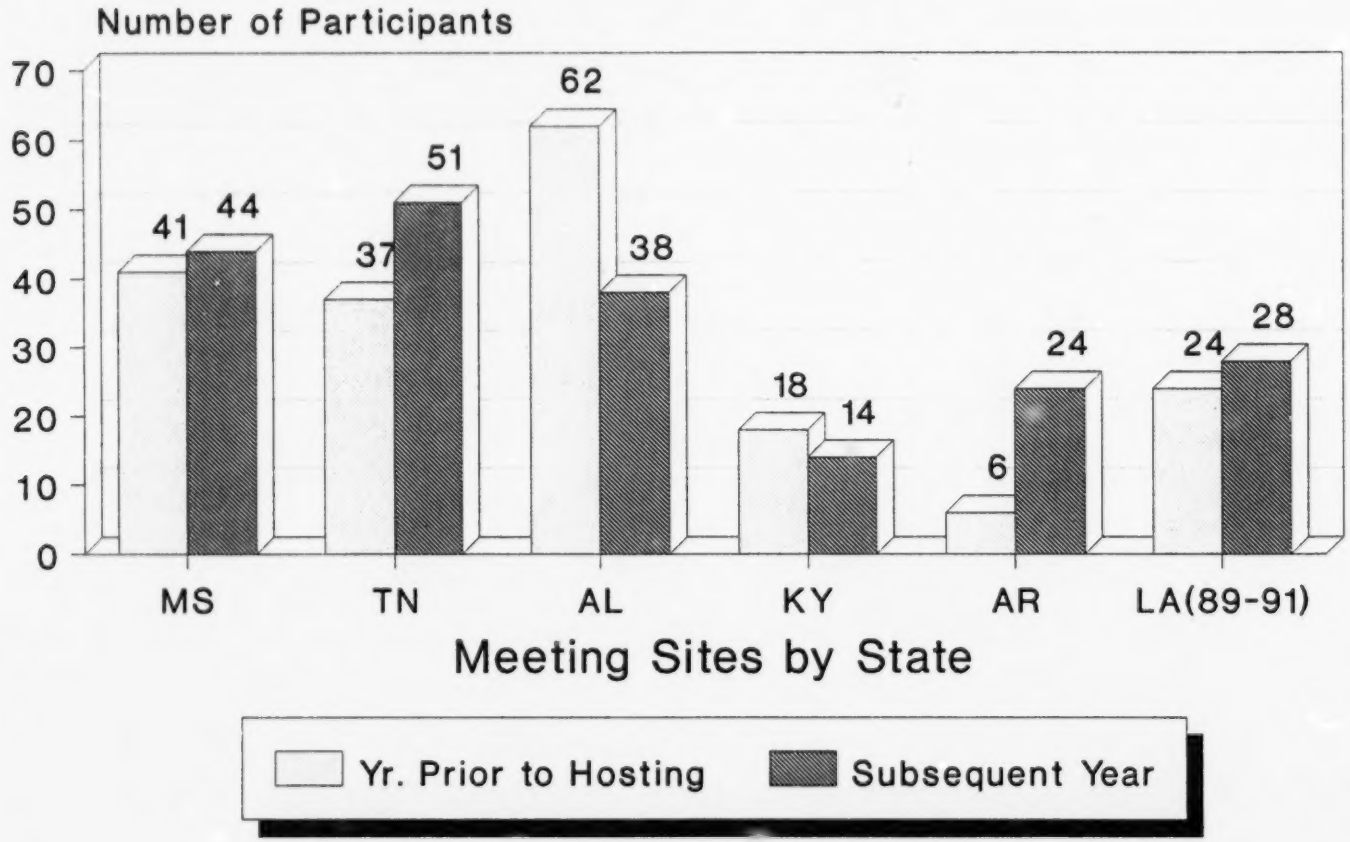
Does not include "regulars".

Chart 4. Host Site Participation
Host and Subsequent Years



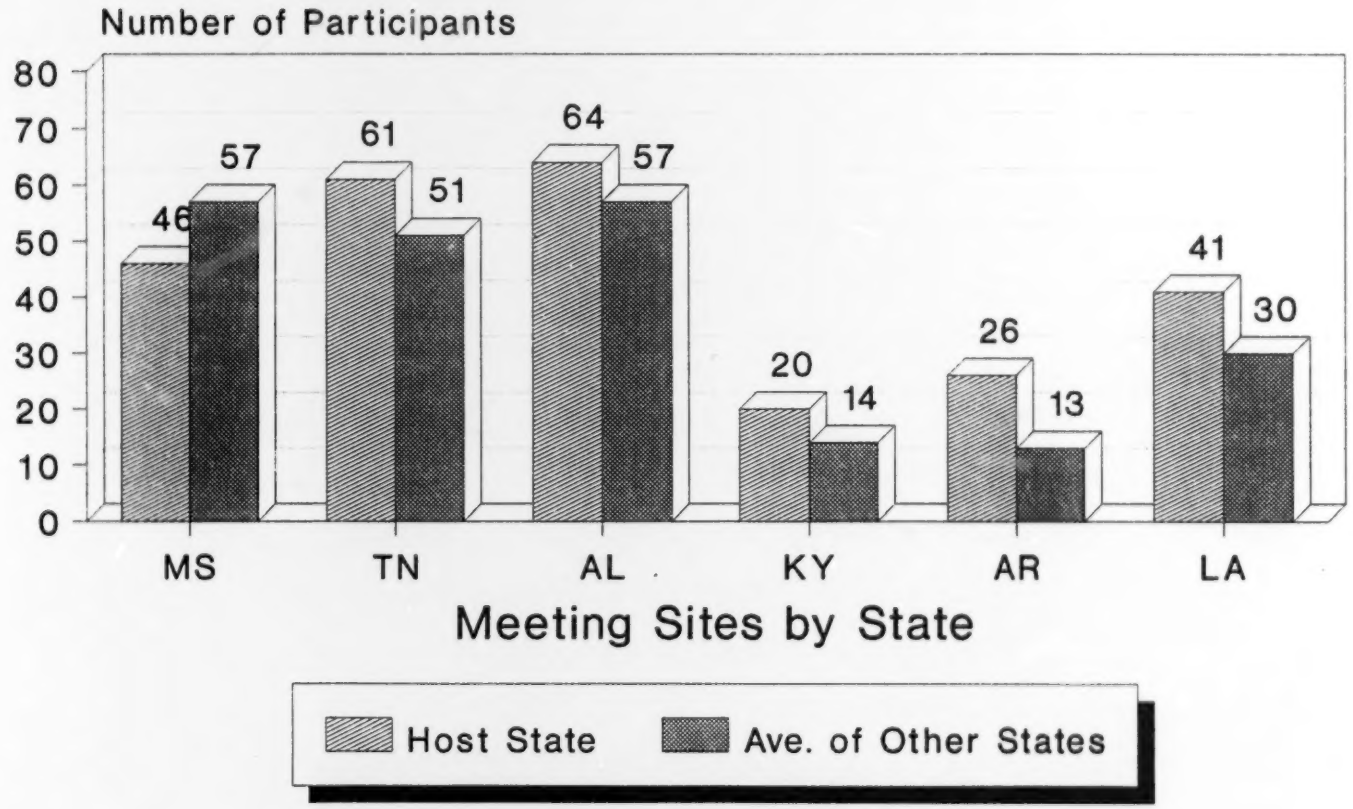
Does not include "regulars".

Chart 5. Host Site Participation Previous and Subsequent Years



Does not include "regulars".

Chart 6. Host Site Participation Comparison with Other States



Does not include "regulars".
KY and LA are averages of two meetings.